

**[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/slavery\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/slavery_1.shtml)**

## **Introduction**

### **Slavery in Islam**

Slavery was common in pre-Islamic times and continued under Islam [©](#)

Slaves were owned in all Islamic societies, both sedentary and nomadic, ranging from Arabia in the centre to North Africa in the west and to what is now Pakistan and Indonesia in the east. Some Islamic states, such as the Ottoman Empire, the Crimean Khanate, and the Sokoto caliphate [Nigeria], must be termed slave societies because slaves there were very important numerically as well as a focus of the polities' energies.

### **Encyclopaedia Britannica - Slavery**

Many societies throughout history have practised [slavery](#), and Muslim societies were no exception.

It's thought that as many people were enslaved in the Eastern slave trade as in the Atlantic slave trade.

It's ironic that when the Atlantic slave trade was abolished the Eastern trade expanded, suggesting that for some Africans the abolition of the Atlantic trade didn't lead to freedom, but merely changed their slave destination.

It's misleading to use phrases such as 'Islamic slavery' and 'Muslim slave trade', even though slavery existed in many Muslim cultures at various times, since the Atlantic slave trade is not called the Christian slave trade, even though most of those responsible for it were Christians.

### **Slavery before Islam**

Slavery was common in pre-Islamic times and accepted by many ancient legal systems and it continued under Islam.

Although Islam is much credited for moderating the age-old institution of slavery, which was also accepted and endorsed by the other monotheistic religions, Christianity and Judaism, and was a well-established custom of the pre-Islamic world, it has never preached the abolition of slavery as a doctrine.

### **Forough Jahanbaksh, Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran, 1953-2000, 2001**

The condition of slaves, like that of women, may well have improved with the coming of Islam, but the institution was not abolished, any more than it was under Christianity at this period.

### **Malise Ruthven, Islam in the World, 2000**

#### **How Islam moderated slavery**

Islam's approach to slavery added the idea that freedom was the natural state of affairs for human beings and in line with this it limited the opportunities to enslave people, commended the freeing of slaves and regulated the way slaves were treated:

- Islam greatly limited those who could be enslaved and under what circumstances (although these restrictions were often evaded)
- Islam treated slaves as human beings as well as property
- Islam banned the mistreatment of slaves - indeed the tradition repeatedly stresses the importance of treating slaves with kindness and compassion
- Islam allowed slaves to achieve their freedom and made freeing slaves a virtuous act
- Islam barred Muslims from enslaving other Muslims

But the essential nature of slavery remained the same under Islam, as elsewhere. It involved serious breaches of human rights and however well they were treated, the slaves still had restricted freedom; and, when the law was not obeyed, their lives could be very unpleasant.

### **The paradox**

A poignant paradox of Islamic slavery is that the humanity of the various rules and customs that led to the freeing of slaves created a demand for new slaves that could only be supplied by war, forcing people into slavery or trading slaves.

### **Muslim slavery continued for centuries**

The legality of slavery in Islam, together with the example of the Prophet [Muhammad](#), who himself bought, sold, captured, and owned slaves, may explain why slavery persisted until the 19th century in many places (and later still in some countries). The impetus for the abolition of slavery came largely from colonial powers, although some Muslim thinkers argued strongly for abolition.

### **Slaves came from many places**

Unlike the Atlantic slave traders, Muslims enslaved people from many cultures as well as Africa. Other sources included the Balkans, Central Asia and Mediterranean Europe.

### **Slaves could be assimilated into Muslim society**

Muhammad's teaching that slaves were to be regarded as human beings with dignity and rights and not just as property, and that freeing slaves was a virtuous thing to do, may have helped to create a culture in which slaves became much more assimilated into the community than they were in the West.

### **Muslim slaves could achieve status**

Slaves in the Islamic world were not always at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Slaves in Muslim societies had a greater range of work, and took on a wider range of responsibilities, than those enslaved in the Atlantic trade.

Some slaves earned respectable incomes and achieved considerable power, although even such elite slaves still remained in the power of their owners.

### **Muslim slavery was not just economic**

Unlike the Western slave trade, slavery in Islam was not wholly motivated by economics.

Although some Muslim slaves were used as productive labour it was not generally on the same mass scale as in the West but in smaller agricultural enterprises, workshops, building, mining and transport.

Slaves were also taken for military service, some serving in elite corps essential to the ruler's control of the state, while others joined the equivalent of the civil service.

Another category of slavery was sexual slavery in which young women were made concubines, either on a small scale or in large harems of the powerful. Some of these women were able to achieve wealth and power.

These harems might be guarded by eunuchs, men who had been enslaved and castrated.

### **Where did the slaves come from?**

Muslim traders took their slaves from three main areas:

- Non-Muslim Africa, in particular the Horn
- Central and Eastern Europe
- Central Asia

### **The legality of slavery today**

While Islamic law does allow slavery under certain conditions, it's almost inconceivable that those conditions could ever occur in today's world, and so slavery is effectively illegal in modern Islam. Muslim countries also use secular law to prohibit slavery.

News stories do continue to report occasional instances of slavery in a few Muslim countries, but these are usually denied by the authorities concerned.

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## **Slavery and Islamic law**

### **Law and slavery**

Islamic law and custom provided no basis for the abolition of slavery or even for the curtailment of the slave trade.

**Bernard Lewis, The Shaping of the Modern Middle East, 1994**

Although the vast majority of contemporary Muslims abhor slavery, it remains part of their religious law.

**'Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Shari'a and Basic Human Rights Concerns, in Liberal Islam, ed Charles Kurzman, 1998**

**Context**

Islamic [sharia](#) law accepted (and accepts) slavery, as did other legal systems of ancient times such as Roman law, [Hebrew](#) law, Byzantine [Christian](#) law, African customary law and [Hindu](#) law.

The world was very different in those days, and practices that seem profoundly unethical to modern minds were common and accepted.

During the formative stages of shari'a (and for the next millennium at least) there was no conception of universal human rights anywhere in the world. Slavery was an established and lawful institution in many parts of the world throughout this period...

**'Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Shari'a and Basic Human Rights Concerns, in Liberal Islam, ed Charles Kurzman, 1998**

Slavery was too fundamental to the structure of Arabian society in the 7th century to be abolished easily. Doing so would have estranged many of the tribes that Muhammad sought to bring together, and severely disrupted the working of society.

Prohibiting slavery in the context of seventh-century Arabia apparently would have been as useful as prohibiting poverty; it would have reflected a noble ideal but would have been unworkable on an immediate basis without establishing an entirely new socioeconomic system.

**Jacob Neusner, Tamara Sonn, Comparing Religions through Law: Judaism and Islam, 1999**

But this was a problem, since Islam placed a high value on human dignity and freedom.

The fact that slavery is a major concern in Islamic law no doubt stems from the prevalence of slavery at the time when Islam was instituted combined with the fact that the Qur'an clearly presents universal freedom and human dignity as its ideal society. Its recommendation that slaves be freed is on the same plane as its recommendation that the poor be clothed and the hungry be fed.

**Jacob Neusner, Tamara Sonn, Comparing Religions through Law: Judaism and Islam, 1999**

So the early Muslims restricted and regulated slavery to remove some of its cruelties, but accepted that it was legal.

... The most that shari'a could do, and did in fact do, in that historical context was to modify and lighten the harsh consequences of slavery and discrimination on grounds of religion or gender...

Shari'a recognized slavery as an institution but sought to restrict the sources of acquisition of slaves, to improve their condition, and to encourage their emancipation through a variety of religious and civil methods.

Nevertheless, slavery is lawful under shari'a to the present day.

**'Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Shari'a and Basic Human Rights Concerns, in Liberal Islam, ed Charles Kurzman, 1998**

### **Is slavery still legal in Islam?**

The answer is that slavery is legal under Islamic law but only in theory. Slavery is illegal under the state law of all Muslim countries.

Theoretically Islamic law lays down that if a person was captured in a lawful jihad or was the descendent of an unbroken chain of people who had been lawfully enslaved, then it might be legal to enslave them.

Nonetheless, should the legal condition for the enslavement of anyone be proven (because he had been taken prisoner fighting against Islam with a view to its extirpation and persisted in invincible ignorance in his sacrilegious and infidel convictions, or because there did exist legal proof that all his ancestors without exception had been slaves descended from a person taken prisoner conducting a warfare of such invincible ignorance) Islam would be bound to recognize such slavery as legal, even though recommending the freeing of the person and if possible his conversion, in this modern age.

**Tabandeh, Muslim Commentary on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, quoted in 'Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Shari'a and Basic Human Rights Concerns, in Liberal Islam, ed Charles Kurzman, 1998**

In practice, it seems virtually impossible that there will ever again be a [jihad](#) that is lawfully declared according to the strict letter of the law, and there are no living descendants of lawful slaves, which means that legal enslavement is unthinkable.

### **The law on slavery**

Islamic law recognises slavery as an institution within society, and attempts to regulate and restrict it in various ways.

Different Islamic legal schools differ in their interpretation of Islamic law on slavery. Local customs in Muslim lands also affected the way slaves were treated.

In the merchant cities of South-East Asia the sharia helped forge a legal distinction between slave and non-slave unknown in the rural hinterland.

More frequently, however, the application of the sharia outside the Middle East was tempered by local customs. This allowed Muslims in regions as distant as Somalia, India and Indonesia to argue for the maintenance of pre-Islamic and other local structures of slavery even if these ran counter to the prescriptions of the sharia.

### **Gwyn Campbell; Frank Cass, *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, 2004**

Islamic law clearly recognises that slaves are human beings, but it frequently treats slaves as if they are property, laying down regulations covering the buying and selling of slaves.

It encourages the freeing of slaves, which has the good effect of diminishing the slave population of a culture and, paradoxically, the bad effect of encouraging those whose livelihood depends on slave labour to find new ways of acquiring slaves.

### **Who can be enslaved**

Under [Islamic law](#) people can only be legally enslaved in two circumstances:

- as the result of being defeated in a war that was legal according to sharia
- if they are born as the child of two slave parents

Other legal systems of the time allowed people to be enslaved in a far wider range of circumstances.

The sharia limits were often either ignored or evaded, and many instances of slave trading by Muslims were in fact illegal, but tolerated.

The following groups of people cannot be made slaves:

- Free Muslims, but note that:
  - Slaves who convert to Islam are not automatically freed
  - Children born to legally enslaved Muslims are also slaves
- Dhimmis

### **Slave rights**

Islamic law gives slaves certain rights:

- Slaves must not be mistreated or overworked, but should be treated well
- Slaves must be properly maintained

- Slaves may take legal action for a breach of these rules, and may be freed as a result
- Slaves may own property
- Slaves may own slaves
- Slaves can get married if their owner consents
- Slaves may undertake business on the owner's behalf
- Slaves guilty of crimes can only be given half the punishment that would be given to a non-slave (although some schools of Islamic law do allow the execution of a slave who commits murder)
- A female slave cannot be separated from her child while it is under 7 years old
- Female slaves cannot be forced into prostitution

### **Slave rights to freedom**

Islamic law allows slaves to get their freedom under certain circumstances. It divides slaves with the right to freedom into various classes:

- The *mukatab*: a slave who has the contractual right to buy their freedom over time
- The *mudabbar*: a slave who will be freed when their owner dies (this might not happen if the owner's estate was too small)
- The *umm walid*, a female slave who had borne her owner a child

### **Slaves must accept**

- Owners are allowed to have sex with their female slaves

### **Restrictions on slaves**

Islamic law imposes many restrictions on slaves:

- Slaves cannot carry out some religious roles
- Slaves can have only limited authority
- Slaves cannot be witnesses in court
- Killing a slave does not carry the death penalty in most schools of Islamic law
- Slaves are punishable under Islamic law if they commit a crime - although for some major crimes they only receive half the punishment of free people

## Muhammad and slavery

### Muhammad and slavery

The [Prophet Muhammad](#) did not try to abolish slavery, and bought, sold, captured, and owned slaves himself. But he insisted that slave owners treat their slaves well and stressed the virtue of freeing slaves.

There are two different ways of interpreting this:

- some modern writers believe that Muhammad intended his teachings to lead to the gradual end of slavery by limiting opportunities to acquire new slaves and allowing existing slaves to become free. This idea doesn't appear in early writings.
- others writers argue that by regulating slavery the Prophet gave his authority to its continued existence, and that by having slaves himself he showed his approval

Muhammad treated slaves as human beings and clearly held some in the highest esteem.

For example, he personally ensured the freedom of Bilal, an African slave who had converted to Islam. Bilal was chosen as the first *muezzin* of Islam because of his beautiful voice. A muezzin is the person who calls the community to the daily prayers, and is a position of great prominence and responsibility.

Zayd was a young boy who had grown up in the household of the Prophet as a slave, and remained with the household, almost as an adopted son, even after he was freed. He was amongst the first four people to adopt Islam. Indeed when Zayd's father (a wealthy nobleman) tracked his son down and offered to buy his freedom from Muhammad, Muhammad told Zayd that he was free to go with his father with no money changing hands, and to his father's astonishment Zayd chose to stay with Muhammad.

The Prophet also married a Coptic Christian slave girl.

In his lifetime the Prophet introduced the following rules about slavery:

- Stated that freeing slaves was the act that God found most acceptable
  - [Zakat](#) (charity - the third [Pillar of Islam](#)) was often used by the state to free slaves
- Stated that freeing a slave was the appropriate way to gain forgiveness for certain wrongs
- Ordered that those who committed certain wrongs should be penalised by having to free their slaves



- Stated that slaves should be allowed to buy their freedom, and if necessary should be given the opportunity to earn money, or be lent money by the state, in order to do so
- Allowed slaves to be freed in certain circumstances
- Stated that slaves' contracts should be interpreted in favour of the slaves
- Stated that the duty of kindness towards slaves was the same of that towards family, neighbours and others
- Stated that when a slave owner had a child with a female slave, the child should be freed and could inherit from their father like any other child (as in the case of [Ibrahim](#))

There are a number of hadith that show that the Prophet treated slaves well and expected others to do the same...

He will not enter Paradise who behaveth ill to his slaves. The Companions said, 'O Apostle of God! have you not told us, that there will be a great many slaves and orphans amongst your disciples?' He said, 'Yes; then be kind to them as to your own children, and give them to eat what you eat yourselves. The slaves that say their prayers are your brothers.

Be kind to slaves as to your own children...and those that say their prayers are your brethren.

They (slaves or servants) are your brothers, and Allah has put them under your command. So the one under whose hand Allah has put his brother, should feed him of what he eats, and give him dresses of what he wears, and should not ask him to do a thing beyond his capacity. And if at all he asks him to do a hard task, he should help him therein.'

'There are three categories of people against whom I shall myself be a plaintiff on the Day of Judgement. Of these three, one is *he who enslaves a free man, then sells him* and eats this money'.

### **al-Bukhari and Ibn Majjah**

Narrated Abu Musa Al-Ash'ari: "The Prophet said, 'Give food to the hungry, pay a visit to the sick and release (set free) the one in captivity (by paying his ransom).'"

### **Bukhari**

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### **Compared to the Atlantic slave trade**

### **Slavery in Muslim cultures and the Atlantic slave trade**

Slavery in Muslim history lasted much longer than the Atlantic slave trade - although slavery had existed in many cultures long before Islam.

The Muslim slave trade from Africa seems to have enslaved roughly similar numbers (estimates vary between 11 and 14 million Africans) to the Atlantic slave trade, and the transportation conditions endured by victims of the Eastern trade were probably just as horrible in their own way as those of the Atlantic slave trade.

One poignant fact is that when the Atlantic slave trade was abolished the Eastern trade expanded, suggesting that for some Africans the abolition of the Atlantic trade didn't lead to freedom, but merely changed their slave destination.

Slavery played a significant part in the history of Muslim civilisation, but it was a form of slavery that was inherently different from the 'slave trade' in that the Muslim concept of slavery regarded those enslaved as people who had some, albeit fewer, human rights that must be respected.

What was notably different from the slavery of the western world, however, was the degree to which they [slaves] were protected by Muslim law. When the law was observed, their treatment was good. They might expect to marry and have families of their own, and they had a good chance of being freed. There were also built in avenues of escape.

### **Gwyn Campbell; Frank Cass, The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia, 2004**

But even though slavery under Islam could be significantly less harsh than that of the Atlantic slave trade, both involved serious breaches of human rights and restricted liberty. However well they were treated the slaves still had restricted freedom, and when the law was not obeyed their lives could be very unpleasant.

The relationship between slave and master in Islam is a very different relationship from that between the American plantation labourer and owner. It was a much more personalized relationship and relatively benevolent. Everything here is relative -- being a slave is being a slave and it shouldn't be romanticized.

### **Ronald Segal, interview with Suzy Hansen in Salon magazine, 2001**

Here are some of the main differences between Muslim slavery and the Atlantic slave trade:

- The Atlantic trade lasted from the 15th to 19th centuries, the Eastern trade from the 7th or 9th century to the 20th
- Under Islam slaves were considered people first, and then property. In the Atlantic trade slaves were considered property not people, and often just regarded as units of productive labour
- Islamic law laid down considerable protection for slaves; those taken for the Atlantic trade had very little protection

- Islamic law only permitted those conquered in legitimate warfare to be enslaved, all other methods being illegal - although this was often ignored - whereas the Atlantic trade enslaved anyone who had commercial value
- In Islam, slave-owners were forbidden to take young children from their mothers, something common in the Atlantic trade
- The owner-slave relationship could be kinder in Islam than in the Atlantic trade, and often more personal
- Islam recommends the freeing of slaves in itself as a 'good' religious act and says that slaves who convert to Islam should be freed. Zakat (the requirement for charity) was used by Muslim states to free slaves. There were many other avenues whereby a slave could be freed, for example as expiation for irregularities in other religious rituals; as a result many more slaves were freed than in the Atlantic trade
- Under Islamic law a slave could take his/her master to the Islamic courts to address a grievance, and the judge had the right to grant freedom against the master's wishes and/or other compensations; there was no such protection for slaves taken by the Atlantic trade
- Islam permitted slaves to attain high office; those taken for the Atlantic trade stayed at the bottom of society
- In the Atlantic trade there were two males to every female; in the Islamic trade, there were two females to every male
- Islam permitted women to be enslaved for sexual purposes, although not for prostitution
- Africans were enslaved in the Atlantic trade to work on an industrial scale in agricultural labour; in the Islamic trade they had a far wider variety of roles
- The Atlantic trade only involved black Africans; Muslim slavery involved many racial groups
- Slavery in the Atlantic trade was highly racist, something prohibited in Islam where there was much less institutionalised racism. Both masters and slaves had a wide range of colours and backgrounds; the result is that former slaves became absorbed into the Islamic world, while former slaves remained a discriminated-against underclass in the USA until comparatively recently

The nature of the Atlantic trade and therefore the survival of racism in the West has been one of segregation. There wasn't this separation in Islam. Whites didn't push blacks off the pavement. They didn't forbid restaurants to serve them. I don't think that there's any disputing that slavery was a more benevolent institution in Islam than it was in the West.

**Ronald Segal, interviewed in Chicago Sun-Times, 17/02/2002**

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## **Economic slavery**

### **Economic slavery in Islam**

Western slavery was motivated by economics - people were enslaved to provide a cheap and disposable workforce on plantations.

Muslims historically did not use slaves as an engine of economic production on the same scale as the West, although some Muslims profited from the actual trading of slaves.

Though Arab and Muslim traders became notorious in the supply of African slaves for the American and Caribbean plantations, there are few examples in the annals of Islam of the collective forced labour found in the Western hemisphere.

### **Malise Ruthven, Islam in the World, 2000**

The 9th century slave rebellion in Iraq may have deterred Muslims from the industrial use of slaves by showing the danger of having a very large slave community in any one place. Apart from 9th century Iraq, the largest scale slave use outside the military was on the clove plantations of Zanzibar.

Nonetheless, as William Gervase Clarence-Smith writes, slaves did play a large part in Muslim economies:

...productive slavery was more extensive in Islam than traditional accounts allow for. Even if large estates were rare, they were not absent.

More striking were the numerous slaves on middling and small properties, a phenomenon about which surprisingly little has been written.

Servile labour was also common in workshops, construction, mining, water control, transport by land and sea, and the extraction of marine resources.

Whether a 'Slave Mode of Production' ever existed in Islam is moot, but the economic role of slavery was substantial, at least in certain places and at specific times.

### **William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Islam and Slavery**

Slaves were also used for domestic work, military service, sexual slavery and civil administration.

## **The slave trade**

Muslims did play a significant role in the slave trade itself as providers of slaves to others.

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## **Elite slavery**

### **Elite slavery**

Something particular to Islamic slave systems was the creation of a slave elite in some Muslim societies that allowed individuals to achieve considerable status, and even power and wealth, while still remaining in some form of 'enslavement'.

The slave elite had enormous value to their Muslim masters because they were a military and administrative group made up of 'outsiders' who didn't have tribal and family allegiances that could conflict with their loyalty to their masters.

It was believed that a corps of highly trained slaves loyal only to the ruler and dependent entirely on his good will would serve the state more reliably and efficiently than a hereditary nobility, whose interests might compete with those of the ruler.

**Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, 1993**

### **The paradox of elite slavery**

Elite slavery is something of a paradox: how can a person have power and hold high office and yet still keep the status of a slave?

One answer is that the slave gets authority and high office because they are dependant on the person who gives them their authority and status and who could remove that status if they chose. Thus elite slaves must give total loyalty and obedience to their master in order to maintain their privileges.

Another view is that the slave who achieves elite status is no longer really a slave, and is able to use their position and power to free themselves of many of the limitations of slavery. This is less convincing since even elite slaves are at risk of losing their privileged status until they break free completely.

The dependency was not all one way - the masters in many ways relied on their elite slaves, because those slaves were the only people they could really trust.

And there was another reason why elite slaves were valuable - precisely because they were slaves, the elite slaves were free of some of the restrictions that limited free people, and this allowed them to do things for their masters that their masters could not otherwise achieve.

### **Examples of elite slavery**

Two examples of elite slavery were the Mamluks and the Devshirme system.

#### **The Mamluks**



An Ottoman Mamluk, by Carle Vernet, 1810 ©

The Mamluk system became firmly established in the Abbasid Empire during the 9th century.

The Mamluks were 'slave soldiers' who eventually came to rule Egypt for over two centuries from 1250 until overthrown by the [Ottomans](#) in the 16th century. After a brief period of oppression the Mamluks were able, once again, to play a significant role in running the country.

Mamluks were originally soldiers captured in Central Asia, but later boys aged 12-14 were specifically taken or bought to be trained as slave soldiers. Their slave status was shown by the name 'Mamluk' which means 'owned'.

Although the Mamluks were not free men (they could not, for example, pass anything on to their children) they were elite slaves who were held in high regard as professional soldiers loyal to their Islamic masters.

Historians have been fascinated by the uniqueness of the Mamluk phenomenon. It was inhuman in some respects (for example, Mamluks being denied the opportunity to bequeath their positions and privileges to their sons), yet it provided Islam with a superb military force and a sophisticated political system.

### **Michael Winter, Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule, 1517-1798, 1992**

In 13th century Egypt loyalty to the masters dissolved and the Mamluks established themselves as the ruling dynasty. Once the Mamluks had successfully revolted against their masters they were, of course, no longer slaves.

They remained in power for the period 1250-1517.

The basic ideal of military slavery - the Mamluk's total loyalty to his master who had bought, trained, maintained and freed him - was a pillar of Mamluk society in Ottoman Egypt, as it had been in the Mamluk Sultanate.

When the master decided that his Mamluk had reached maturity and was ready to assume an office, he set him free, and 'allowed him to grow his beard.' He was now a free man, no longer dependent.

The master often appointed these former slaves to army posts, to the beylicate [the beys were high ranking emirs who held important positions in Egyptian government], or to the regimental command. Very often, the master decided whom his former slave would marry, a decision which could advance the Mamluk socially and financially.

## **Michael Winter, Egyptian Society under Ottoman Rule, 1517-1798, 1992**

### **The devshirme system**

The devshirme system introduced in the 14th century compelled non-Muslims in parts of the Ottoman Empire to hand over some of their children to be converted to Islam and work as slaves. Some writers say that between half a million to one million people were enslaved in this way over the centuries.

Conquered Christian communities, especially in the Balkans, had to surrender twenty percent of their male children to the state.

Some of these were trained for government service, where they were able to reach very high ranks, even that of Grand Vezir.

Many of the others served in the elite military corps of the Ottoman Empire, called the Janissaries, which was almost exclusively made up of forced converts from Christianity.

The devshirme played a key role in Sultan Mehmet's conquest of Constantinople, and from then on regularly held very senior posts in the imperial administration.



Mehmet II commands ships at the siege of Constantinople [©](#)

Although members of the devshirme class were technically slaves, they were of great importance to the Sultan because they owed him their absolute loyalty and became vital to his power.

This status enabled some of the 'slaves' to become both powerful and wealthy. Their status remained restricted, and their children were not permitted to inherit their wealth or follow in their footsteps.

Not all writers agree that the devshirme system was beneficial as well as oppressive, and point out that many Christian families were hostile and resentful about it - which is perhaps underlined by the use of force to impose the system.

The devshirme system continued until the end of the seventeenth century.

## **Eunuchs**

Male slaves who had had their sexual organs removed were called eunuchs, and played an important part in some Muslim societies (as they did in some other cultures).

They had the advantage for their masters of not being subject to sexual influence, and as they were unlikely to marry, they had no family ties to hinder their devotion to duty.

Eunuch slavery involved compulsory mutilation, which usually took place between the ages of 8 and 12. Without modern medical skills and anaesthetics this was painful, and often led to fatal complications, and sometimes to physical or psychological problems for those who survived the operation.

Eunuchs had a particular role as guardians of the harem and were the main way in which the women of the harem had contact with the world outside.

In the Ottoman Empire eunuchs from Africa held considerable power from the mid sixteenth century to the eighteenth.

It's recorded that the Ottoman family owned 194 eunuchs as late as 1903, of whom 35 'bore a title of some seniority'.

Eunuchs could also play important military roles.

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## **Sexual slavery**

### **Sexual slavery - the harem**

Concubinage may be defined as the more or less permanent cohabitation (outside the marriage bond) of a man with a woman or women, whose position would be that of secondary wives, women bought, acquired by gift, captured in war, or domestic slaves.

## **Encyclopaedia of Islam**

Muslim cultures are thought to have had more female slaves than male slaves.

Enslaved women were given many tasks and one of the most common was working as a domestic servant.

But some female slaves were forced to become sex workers: not prostitutes, as this is forbidden in Islam, but concubines. Concubines were women who were sexually available to their master, but not married to him. A Muslim man could have as many concubines as he could afford.

Concubinage was not unique to Islam; the [Bible](#) records that King Solomon and [King David](#) both had concubines, and it is recorded in other cultures too.



Being a concubine did have some benefits: if a slave woman gave birth to her owner's child, her status improved dramatically - she could not be sold or given away, and when her owner died she became free. The child was also free and would inherit from their father as any other children.

Concubinage was not prostitution in the commercial sense both because that was explicitly forbidden and because only the owner could legitimately have sex with a female slave; anyone else who had sex with her was guilty of fornication.

### **The harem**

Concubines lived in the harem, an area of the household where women lived separately from men. The nature of Ottoman harems is described by Ehud R Toledano:

The harem system grew out of the need in Ottoman society to achieve gender segregation and limit women's accessibility to men who did not belong to their family.

Households were divided into two separate sections: the selamlık, housing the male members, and the haremlik, where the women and children dwelt.

At the head of the women's part reigned the master's mother or his first wife (out of a maximum of four wives allowed by Islam).

The concubines were also part of the harem, where all the attendants were women. Male guests of the master were not entertained in the harem.

An active and well-developed social network linked harems of similar status across Ottoman towns and villages; mutual visits and outdoor excursions were common.

For the women who actually spent their lives in the harems, reality was, of course, far more mixed and complicated.

The women who came into the harem as slaves (*câriyes*) were taught and trained to be "ladies," learning all the domestic and social roles attached to that position. As they grew up, they would be paired with the men of the family either as concubines or as legal wives.

However, harem slaves' freedom of choice was rather limited, as was that of women in general in an essentially male-dominated environment. Harem slaves frequently had to endure sexual harassment from male members of the family.

### **Ehud R. Toledano, Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East, 1998**

#### **The nature of concubinage**

Writers disagree over the nature of concubinage and the harem:

- Some argue that it was seriously wrong in that

- it was just slavery
- it breached human rights
- it exploited women
- women could be bought and sold, or given as gifts
- it involved compulsory non-consensual sex - which would nowadays be called 'rape'
- it reinforced male power in the culture
- Others say that it was relatively benign, because
  - it gave female slaves a relatively easy existence
  - it gave female slaves a chance to rise socially
  - it gave female slaves a chance to gain power
  - it gave female slaves a chance to gain their freedom

A balanced view might be to say that sexual slavery in this context was a very bad thing, but that it was possible for some of the more fortunate victims to gain benefits that provided some degree of compensation.

### **The political role of concubines**

Concubines could play an important political role and have considerable direct political influence on the policy of the state.

More than any other Muslim dynasty, the Ottomans raised the practice of slave concubinage to a reproductive principle: after the generations of Osman and Orhan, virtually all offspring of the sultans appear to have been born of concubine mothers.

### **Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, 1993**

The benefit to the state, or at least to the ruling dynasty, of having the ruling line born through concubines rather than wives was that only one family was involved - the family of a concubine was irrelevant, but the family of a wife would expect to gain power and influence through their relationship to the mother of the son. These conflicting interests could threaten the succession and weaken the ruling family. (This didn't eliminate conflict between heirs and families altogether, but it probably reduced it.)

Concubines as well as wives also played an important role in strengthening cohesion, stability, and continuity at household level too, as this remark about 18th century Cairo demonstrates:

Marital and nonmarital unions strengthened the links among men; women legitimized the succession of men to power, and women's property ownership added to the overall wealth, prestige, and power of a household.

**Mary Ann Fay, From Concubines to Capitalists: Women, Property, and Power in Eighteenth-century Cairo, Journal of Women's History, 1998**

And later in the same article the writer describes the inevitable tension inherent in the status of harem women in that society:

However, the harem was not a prison; it was instead the family quarters of an upper-class home which became exclusively female space when men not related to the women were in the house and whose entry into the harem was forbidden. Women, heavily veiled, could and did leave their homes...

... Women were not imprisoned in the harem or in the veils and cloaks that concealed their bodies and faces on the street, but both customs were important signifiers of women's lack of sexual autonomy and of men's control over the selection of women's sexual and marital partners.

In the economic sphere, however, women had a great deal of autonomy...

... Therefore, the eighteenth-century Egyptian household should not be seen as the site of unrelieved oppression of women but rather in terms of asymmetries of power between men and women.

**Mary Ann Fay, From Concubines to Capitalists: Women, Property, and Power in Eighteenth-century Cairo, Journal of Women's History, 1998**

In the Ottoman Empire the sale of woman as slaves continued until 1908.

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**Abolition**

**Muslims and the abolition of slavery**

Slavery remained part of the fabric of Islam for over 1200 years (although the Druze, a group that sprung from Muslim roots, abolished it in the 11th century).

While slavery was in theory greatly limited by Islamic law, in practice it persisted on a large scale in Muslim lands.

During the 20th century attitudes to slavery changed radically and in 1990 The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam stated that:

Human beings are born free, and no one has the right to enslave, humiliate, oppress or exploit them, and there can be no subjugation but to God the Most-High.

**Article 11, Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, 1990**

The Declaration also includes a number of other articles that are incompatible with slavery, although "All the rights and freedoms stipulated in this Declaration are subject to the Islamic [Shari'ah](#)".

Since slavery is permitted by Islamic law, Muslim countries have used secular law to ban it. Some countries outlawed slavery only comparatively recently:

- Qatar in 1952
- Yemen and Saudi Arabia in 1962
- Mauritania in 1980

### **Early opponents**



Mughal painting of Akbar as a boy, circa 1557 [©](#)

The idea that slavery should be abandoned began to be seriously discussed in the 16th century. The [Mughal](#) Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) banned the slave trade in his Indian territory.

The Muslim leader and reformer Nasr al-Din denounced slavery to the people of Senegal in the 1670s and banned the sale of slaves to Christians there, undermining the French trade in slaves.

In some countries, slaves who held high rank demonstrated that slaves were perfectly capable of playing any role in society if they were freed. Egypt had even been ruled by a slave dynasty for more than a century. These traditions slowly changed some Muslim thinking about slavery, and gradually created a climate in which the pressure for abolition could build.

But serious abolition for the Muslim world had to wait until the 19th century.

### **Attacking the slave trade**

Because slavery was accepted by Islamic law it would have been difficult or impossible to forbid slavery itself, so the abolition pressure was concentrated on the transportation of slaves, including the slave markets, which was where the worst cruelties were to be found.

Islam forbade raids to gain slaves, making a slave out of a free person and other cruelties. So Muslim abolitionists focused on showing slave trading was illegal under Islamic law, knowing that if they could stop the trade in slaves, slavery itself would slowly die out from lack of supply. For the same reason, colonial powers attacked the trade in slaves as much as the institution of slavery.

The slave trade in Muslim societies ended not so much through a single act of abolition but by withering away as the result of external and internal pressure.

The outside pressure came from colonial powers that had only recently abandoned slavery themselves:

- Colonial powers such as Britain and France applied great pressure for the abolition of slavery in their dominions. This pressure was successful in some places, like Egypt, but much less influential in others.
- Colonial powers also took direct action against slave traders: the British Navy played a role in intercepting and taking action against slave traders, and between 1817 and 1890 signed treaties with over 80 territories allowing them to do this.
- Christian missionaries, including David Livingstone, aroused public indignation in the West.

Internal pressure came from a variety of Muslim sources:

From the 1870s, radical and gradual rationalists, together with moderate literalists and progressive ulama, could all be placed in the broad category of opponents of slavery, despite their manifold disagreements.

### **William G. Clarence-Smith, Religions and the abolition of slavery - a comparative approach**

Muslim abolitionists were influenced by factors like these:

- The abolition of the Atlantic slave trade provided an enlightening example
- Some Muslim thinkers readdressed Islamic ideas on human equality
- Some Muslim thinkers saw slavery as colonialist/imperialist behaviour that was incompatible with growing anti-colonialism
- Some Muslim thinkers regarded slavery as an activity incompatible with the modern world
- Changes in culture brought about by factors such as urbanisation, changes in the demand for labour, education, a desire to relate to Western nations as equals
- An increase in the freeing of slaves in some territories helped to accustom people to the ending of slavery

The result of these forces was to shrink the slave trade, and put pressure on slavery itself.

Initially, it was a source of great hostility that the West dared to intervene in Islamic affairs in contradiction to what was allowed by the Koran.

But as Western influence, or modernism, became more and more [widespread], it became less fashionable as well as profitable in Islam to own slaves. And it became illegal over much of the area.

The pressures against slavery were extremely great from Western powers. It was the moral issue. It became more scandalous because the conditions of procurement and transport became more and more horrendous.

### **Ronald Segal, interview with Suzy Hansen, Salon Magazine, 2001**

#### **Abolition**

The Ottoman Empire was the major Muslim slave society of the abolition period, and it abolished the slave trade in stages.

Although the Ottomans never abolished slavery itself, their policy of restricting the slave trade and increasing opportunities for slaves to get their freedom greatly reduced the number of slaves in its territories:

- 1847: slave trade banned in Persian Gulf
- 1857: African slave trade banned
- 1864: Traffic in Georgian and Circassian child slaves restricted
- 1867: Programme introduced to help slaves from Russia get their freedom
- 1887-1880: Conventions against the slave trade signed with Britain
- 1890: Brussels Act against slave trade signed

Slavery was harder to outlaw in areas far from central government where tribal traditions had been less influenced by the factors above, and where the military power of the centre was much weaker.

The slavers retreated into these areas, and moved their slaves to market more secretly. Quite a few of the anti-slavery military initiatives ended in victory for the slavers rather than the forces of abolition.

Some other Muslim countries passed laws allowing for the prosecution not only of the sellers of slaves but the buyers too.

The Indian Slavery Act of 1844 made slavery illegal there, and Egypt in 1896 implemented laws with very severe penalties for slaving activities.

British colonial power played a major role, enforcing treaties that prohibited slaving.

The British felt that they had a mission to do this - as can be seen from this Foreign Office document of 1861:

Captain Hamerton should take every opportunity of impressing upon these Arabs that the nations of Europe are destined to put an end to the African Slave Trade, and that Great Britain is the main instrument in the Hands of Providence for the accomplishment of this purpose.

That it is in vain for these Arabs to endeavour to resist the consummation of that which is written in the Book of Fate, and that they ought to bow to superior power, to leave off a pursuit which is doomed to annihilation, and a perseverance in which will only involve them in losses and other evils.

**British Foreign Office document, 1861**

The British action did not gain universal support. The Sultan of Zanzibar wrote to the British Consul:

If I put a stop to the traffic in slaves it will ruin these countries, and it will ruin my subjects; and I am sure that the British Government would never agree to this; my friend, it is in my wish to comply with all the desires of the British Government but these countries cannot do without slaves. For the British Government is far off, and does not know the circumstances of these countries.